



U.S. EMBASSY - BAGHDAD

2008 Provincial Reconstruction Team News

-Schools Open in Baghdad Area amid Improved Security-

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July 21, 2008

Forward Operating Base Kalsu - For school-children in the rural areas surrounding Baghdad getting an education has become a difficult, even dangerous prospect in recent years. Teachers and staff fled fighting while in some cases, the schools themselves were destroyed and looted by insurgents.

The area just south of Baghdad where the 2nd Brigade Combat Team (BCT), 3rd Infantry Division arrived in June 2007 had long been an insurgent stronghold, with many villages controlled by al-Qaeda terrorists who kept children, especially girls, from attending school.

Now, the area is more secure than it has been in years, with Iraqi Army and Iraqi Police establishing a presence and preparing to hold gains made following the surge of 2007. The Ministry of Education has ordered teachers to return to their rural schools and progress is being made in school rehabilitation and construction using both U.S. and Iraqi money.

As part of that effort the Baghdad-7 embedded Provincial Reconstruction Team (ePRT) and the U.S. Army unit it works with, the 2nd BCT, has spent millions of dollars to increase learning opportunities and build capacity among Iraqi educators.

“About two years ago, the Ministry of Education ordered all of the teachers out of the rural areas because the security situation was so bad,” said Capt. Trista Mustaine, educational adviser to the ePRT. In the absence of licensed teachers, volunteers have helped out. Like many other Iraqi public servants, they often worked for long periods without being paid.

Now, with improved security, there are currently four school improvement projects in the ePRT/BCT's, worth more than \$1 million. More than \$2.2 million has been spent so far on school repair from the U.S. Army's Commander's Emergency Response Program (CERP) funds administered by the 2nd BCT, with another \$500,000 worth of projects in the pipeline, Mustaine said.



Smiling Iraqi elementary school students in a recently re-opened rural Baghdad Province school.

Although reconstruction costs have largely been provided by Coalition forces, the Iraqi government is taking up the task and helping to get local schools repaired and reopened before the next school year begins. In the village of Sayifiyah, for example, the Maahmoon School is being renovated with Government of Iraq funding from the Baghdad Provincial Council.

A new line of funding has also come through for schools in the form of I-CERP, which uses Iraqi money within the framework of Coalition CERP. “I think the biggest success in capacity building is I-CERP,” said Mustaine. “It’s Iraqi money, filtered through the U.S. Treasury and implemented jointly by Coalition forces and the Government of Iraq (GOI). It’s a step toward building capacity and gets [the GOI] spending their own money.

“Currently we have eight schools funded with I-CERP and three pending funding.” Altogether I-CERP is providing more than \$980,000 for school projects in the area, Mustaine said.

At the al-Alemia School in Arab Jabour, south of Baghdad, I-CERP helped to initially repair damage caused by insurgents who looted equipment and left behind Improvised Explosive Devices (IEDs). Within days, students were back in class, but lots of work remained to be done, according to Capt. James Anthony. He commands C Company C, 1st Battalion of the 30th Infantry Regiment.

“We did some minor repairs, just to keep the school going, fixing windows and doors,” said Anthony. Teachers came back to teach, working for free at first, until the Iraqi Ministry of Education (MOE) stepped up to cover their salaries.

After getting teachers paid, the next big challenge was getting the extensive damage repaired. I-CERP committed \$445,000 to pay for the work, and repairs are scheduled to be completed in August.

Anthony said it has been a community effort from the start. “One of the great things about the school repairs is that it has employed a lot of workers from the area,” Anthony said. “You have a lot of people from the community actually working on the school that their children attend.”

Mustaine noted that thanks to gains made by the ePRT and 2nd BCT, Iraqis “can work freely in the area to make sure their schools have what they need to teach the children. Our goal is to provide accessible education for everyone. We have started the ball rolling and the GOI will keep it going in the future.”